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SIPDIS

SENSITIVE

DEPARTMENT FOR WHA/CEN/BRIGHAM

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PINR](#) [PM](#) [POL](#) [SPECIALIST](#)

SUBJECT: Rallies, a ceremony, and transition planning.

Panama Election Countdown #13: 2 days to go.

Ref: A. Panama 0975

[B.](#) Panama 0936

Summary/Comment: Almost Showtime

[¶1.](#) (SBU) Presidential candidates staged campaign closing rallies throughout the final week before Panama's Sunday, May 2 General Elections. EmbOffs met OAS observers to discuss Election Day plans on April 27. Electoral authorities announced final logistical arrangements and accepted control of Panama's Public Forces from President Moscoso in an April 26 protocol ceremony. On Election Day, Embassy will log and report observer feedback from the field and keep Washington abreast of preliminary and final results, as well as provide background on the presidential and vice-presidential winners.

Aleman's last shebang

[¶2.](#) (SBU) In a packed but listless gathering in downtown Panama City, the Administration-backed alliance candidate, Arnulfista Jose Miguel Aleman held his final rally on Sunday, April 24. While the event was crowded and colorful, the masses liked the concerts more than the speeches. At least 200,000 Arnulfista, National Liberal Republican (MOLIRENA) and Liberal National Party (PLN) followers were bussed in from throughout the country to participate. Responding to PRD claims that the Arnulfistas would try to manipulate voting results (an extremely remote scenario), Aleman shot back that the PRD were the "masters of electoral fraud" and insisted that Arnulfistas be attentive on Election Day.

[¶3.](#) (SBU) First Presidential candidate Jesus Rosas reminded the multitudes of the opposition PRD's history of wrongdoing, even mentioning names of people who disappeared during the military regime of late General Omar Torrijos, Martin Torrijos' father. EmbOffs spoke to several GOP authorities at the event, many of whom were surprisingly enthusiastic about an Aleman win. On the other hand, GOP legislative candidates were positive about being re-elected, but confided that Aleman's is losing on their turf.

Torrijos says "yes we can"

[¶4.](#) (SBU) As well as successful 4/24 and 4/25 rallies outside the capital, Martin Torrijos and the PRD staged an energetic 4/28 campaign-closing rally in the same Panama City venue that their Administration opponent Jose Miguel Aleman used just 3 days earlier. PolOff spoke to several Torrijos team members at the event, who were unanimously optimistic about a Torrijos win and relieved that the campaign is almost over. None of the mud that opponents have thrown at Torrijos in the past weeks has stuck, they claimed. Everyone, including Torrijos supporter, salsa superstar, and aspiring cabinet member Ruben Blades, used the campaign slogan "yes we can" (si se puede in Spanish) to animate the crowd.

[¶5.](#) (SBU) Martin's speech was full of crowd-pleasing sound bites, but many critics, particularly his Arnulfista opponents, considered it devoid of substance. Torrijos took aim at the Arnulfistas, but insisted that he wants to defeat corruption, poverty, and unemployment, not just the Arnulfistas. Torrijos' evident appeal to the crowd of over 100,000 (but not bussed in from other parts of the country) exceeded that of highly popular Panama City Mayor Juan Carlos Navarro, who spoke first. Martin's support among young Panamanians is unmatched by any of his opponents. Several PRD legislative candidates in their early 30s remarked to PolOff that they represent the new face of the PRD. One expressed concern that, much like in the U.S.,

young Panamanians are most likely not to vote. (Comment:
The untested supposition is that they would vote for
Torrijos if they do show up at the polls. End Comment.)

Endara tops off his tank

16. (SBU) Former President Guillermo Endara refuted claims by his Arnulfista and PRD opponents that he is physically and electorally weak. Garnering popular support for his frugal campaign, Solidarity candidate Guillermo Endara ended his six-day caravan on April 27 in Colon, his strongest province, by repeating that he is not beholden to campaign donors, unlike his opponents. Endara, who started the caravan in the Western Province of Chiriqui, transited the provinces of Veraguas, Herrera, Los Santos, Coclé, and Panama before arriving in Colon. Though not a glitzy extravaganza, Endara's caravan drew a significant following along its course despite a slow start. Turnout in Colon was strong, but small compared to Torrijos and Aleman's Panama City rallies.

17. (SBU) Panamanians old enough to remember Endara's presidency tend to recall him fondly, identify with his "ordinary guy" image and respect his reputation for honesty. Random EmbOff taxi-driver polls still show him as the frontrunner. In his final speech, Endara shouted, "I'm going to win damn it!" ("Voy a ganar, carajol") That sort of vulgarity is an advantage with Panamanian masses, but cause for others to worry about the international image that Endara would project. In his promise to be accountable, Endara told voters to "yank on my ears," ("jalar mis orejas") if as President he does not live up to his campaign promises.

OAS Observers discuss plans with Embassy

18. (SBU) Chief of OAS' Observer mission to Panama Moises Benamor met Ambassador Watt on 4/27 to discuss observation plans. The OAS intends to focus on two issues: (i) hard to access areas of the country, and (ii) the role of collective actors like the government, the political parties, and the press in the electoral process. In addition to a quick-count for TE consumption of presidential votes, the OAS will interview voters and electoral officials on their views about the electoral process. Benamor and his colleagues also trained OAS international observers and Panamanian electoral authorities on election observation. Emboffs exchanged numbers with Benamor and his team and will communicate with the OAS delegation throughout Election Day.

TE in command of Panama's Public Forces

19. (SBU) On 4/26, President Moscoso and Minister of Government and Justice Arnulfo Escalona transferred control over Panama's Public Forces (National Police (PNP), National Maritime Service (SMN), National Air Service (SAN) and the Institutional Protection Service (SPI)) to the Electoral Tribunal (TE) in a ceremony attended by the entire Moscoso cabinet as well as political party and Public Forces representatives. As set forth in Electoral Code Article 197 control over Public Forces will revert to the executive branch after the TE has issued credentials to the President-elect (usually a few days after Election Day). This part of Panama's electoral process is a holdover of the transition from dictatorship to democracy. Since the TE has coordinated every step of the electoral process with the Public Forces, the transfer ceremony was just a formality.

Final Electoral Data

110. (U) Panama's seven political parties have accredited 57,766 of their members nationwide to represent them at the polls. Also, 20,124 electoral volunteers will staff polls throughout the country. The Electoral Tribunal (TE) has hired, trained, and accredited 4,162 management and support staff and 3,243 members of vote counting boards. Finally the TE has rented 7 helicopters, 5 small planes, 8 large boats, 160 smaller boats, 1,219 horses and 1,843 vehicles to transport staff and materials on election weekend.

Moscoso promises smooth transition

111. (SBU) President Mireya Moscoso announced that soon after Election Day she would appoint a commission to coordinate transition issues with the President-elect's representatives. Former President Endara appointed a 1994 transition commission that worked closely with his successor, Ernesto Perez Balladares (EPB), but EPB did not do the same in 1999 for Moscoso representatives. Perez Balladares' commission ignored meeting and information

requests, generating a bitter transition. EPB even used the Legislative Assembly he controlled to pass a law exempting him from attending Moscoso's inauguration. (Note: Prior to 1999, the outgoing President participated in installing the new President by transferring the official sash and delivering a farewell speech. End Note.) When the Moscoso government took over they found erased hard drives in several government offices and had to hire computer specialists to restore lost data. (Comment: Embassy plans to press GOP leaders to fulfill Moscoso's pledge to ensure a smooth transition.)

WATT